



Customer Engagement with Self-Expressive Brands: Brand Love and Word of Mouth Marketing

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Abstract: *It is the brand name and identity which build customer loyalty and place value on them, and consolidates the position of company and product in the market. The purpose of this research was to investigate “customer engagement with self-expressive brands, brand love and word-of-mouth marketing”. The statistical population was all users of Telegram, Facebook and the other social networks in Isfahan. A sample of 384 individuals completed a 24-item standard questionnaire adopted from the Wallace and Chernatony research (2014). The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were assessed and validated using confirmatory factor analysis (construct validity) and Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, respectively. Structural equation modeling via LISREL was used for hypothesis testing. The results of the research showed that the self-expressive brand (inner self) has a positive direct effect on brand love and the effect size was 0.29; self-expressive brand (inner self) has a positive direct effect on word-of-mouth marketing and the effect size was 0.40; brand love has a positive direct effect on word-of-mouth marketing and the effect size was 0.31; brand love has a positive direct effect on brand admiration and the effect size was 0.66; and self-expressive brand (inner self) has a positive direct effect on brand admiration (acceptance) and the effect size was 0.16; however, self-expressive brand (social self) has no positive direct effect on brand love, brand admiration, and word-of-mouth marketing.*

Keywords: *Brand Love, Word-Of-Mouth Marketing, Self-Expressive Brand (Self-Social).*

INTRODUCTION

Today, consumer buying behavior and their marketing communication behavior are affected by social media and virtual environments. Social networks are referred to as the most important subset of social media, a group of people who interact with each other and share content such as information, requirements, activities and ideas (Jafarpour, 2011: 2). On the other hand, the emergence of social media and the increasing rate of user interaction on social media networks have made business executives and marketers regard these networks as important sources that attract potential customers for their brands and products (Kozinets, 2010). Therefore, given the great effect of social media on users and in fact, on consumers of goods and services, it is necessary that researchers investigate the issue.

On the other hand, brand engagement is a combination of both experimental and social dimensions (Gambetti et al., 2012), which is defined as follows: “the level of a customer’s motivational state of mind characterized by

specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in brand interaction” (Hollebeek, 2011: 790). This article focuses on the social dimension of brand engagement (Gambetti et al., 2012: 681).

This article investigates brand engagement on Facebook. As Malhotra et al. (2013, p. 18) stated: “various brands accepted Facebook as an effective way of marketing and informing to achieve engagement”. The number of likes, shares, or messages on a Facebook page of a brand is a manifest variable for that brand engagement (Chauhan and Phillai, 2013; Hoffman and Fodor, 2010; Malhotra et al., 2013).

In addition, brand engagement on Facebook is more likely to affect other people: those who click the option like in the Facebook network are 2.4 times more likely to have friends than other users (Nelson-Field et al., 2012). There is not much information about the relationship between liking a brand on a social network and users’ approach towards that brand. This research has been conducted to find out whether there is a relationship between brand engagement by liking it on social networks and the use of self-expressive brand and brand love, or not. Since the traditional view of brand engagement is rooted in alike cases (Gronroos, 2007), we posed the question that whether interaction in online environments, in which liking or favoring a brand occurs in an instant, is effective in describing or introducing the users’ individual or social self via a brand outside this virtual environment? In addition, based on a research by Carrol and Ahuvia (2006), we examine whether there is a relationship between a brand that is used to introduce self and is liked and word-of-mouth marketing in the virtual social environment, or not?

Theoretical Foundations of the Research

1. Inner Self-Expressive Brands

The inner self-expressive brands represent behavioral characteristics towards a particular brand, and liking the brand, the consumer wants to express his personal and behavioral characteristics (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006).

The inner self-expressive brands represent behavioral characteristics, and liking the brand, the consumer wants to express his personal and behavioral characteristics. Social self-expressive brands represent a person’s social status in groups, his social roles, and his relationship with other people in social networks. Social networks allow users to interact with brands and people who share the same brand preferences. On social networks, identity is created by consumers describing themselves and how they communicate with others in a network. Consumers who click the option like for a brand express their ideal or real selves by means of brand engagement (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006).

Sprott et al. (2009) argue that consumers by liking a brand consider the role of brand engagement in their own impressions or self-image. In social networks, consumers who engage with a brand indicated their intention to like a brand is to express themselves or show themselves on online social networks. Such self-expressive brands are defined as the customers’ perception of a particular brand and the extent to which it enhances their social self, or reflects their inner self (Hollebeek, 2011).

Social networks allow consumers to represent the ideal self, hence, consumers choose brands to show or express themselves. There is a significant relationship between self-expressive brand names, word-of-mouth marketing and brand love in social networks. Social networks are merely a unique environment for the expression of users’ individual and social selves in interaction with other products, services, and brands (Kozinets, 2010).

2. Social Self-Expressive Brand

Social self-expressive brands represent a person social status in groups, his social roles, and his relationship with other people in social networks (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006)

Recently, users and academic scholars have found that liking on social networks provides information on brand engagement. Hoffman and Fodor (2010) differentiate between the strategies used for building brand engagement on social networks (such as weblogs with podcasts, movies and other social media tools), and the

criteria used for assessing the performance of the social media. They argue that an appropriate criterion for brand engagement in social networks is the number likes that a brand receives by a variety of admirers. Consumers express their self-image by liking a brand. The self-image can express a person's behavioral characteristics, and in fact, it is the idea the person has of himself; or it can be an image of the person's social self, and actually, it is the image of a person's social status in other people's minds. The self-expressive brands are in two forms of inner and social self (Wallace and De Chernatony, 2014).

3. Brand Love

Brand love as the emotional dimension of brand interest focuses on long-term interaction. Different behaviors are observed considering the level of brand loyalty and love, while one-time use of brand may bring satisfaction and generate interest, brand popularity is necessary for long-term interactions (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

McQueen et al. (1993) through dependency theory explained that the emotional success between brand and consumer can lead to the commitment. Chaudhuri (2007) emphasized the importance of the emotional continuum which links the prerequisites of feelings and emotions to its end results such as dependency and commitment. Dependence reflects a strong emotional bond with the brand, and it can be defined as strong, reciprocal, and sustained emotional and mental relationship between the consumer and the brand, and it indicates a sense of belonging, friendship, and familiarity. Brand love is considered in consumer researches as a major element in consumers' relationships with commercial brands (Ahuvia, 1993). Brand love is defined as an emotional and passionate relationship between a satisfied consumer and a particular commercial brand name. Ahuvia, as one of the leading researchers who established the concept of brand love, states that brand love includes the passion in relation to the brand, attachment to the brand, the positive evaluation of the brand, positive emotions in response to the brand, and declarations of love to a brand (Ahuvia, 2005). The important point is that the concept of love is broad and inexpressible, and similar feelings do not necessarily mean brand love and popularity for the consumer.

Most research on brand popularity is theoretical research. Shimp and Madden (1998) examined the relationship between person and objects. Ahuvia (1993) studied the phenomenon of philopragia (love objects). Wang et al. (2004) also studied product love. Thomson et al. (2005) also examined the emotional relationship between brand and customer. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) conducted a research on brand popularity. Shimp and Madden (1998) divided the customer-object relations into eight kinds according to three main components of Sternberg's theory of love; the eight kinds are non-love, like, infatuation, functionalism, forbidden need, utilitarianism, weak need, loyalty.

4. Word-Of-Mouth Marketing

Word-of-mouth marketing, also called word-of-mouth advertising, is used to describe the oral communication (whether positive or negative) that takes place among groups such as product providers, independent experts, family and friends and real and potential customers (Banerjee et al. 2000: 7). Word-of-mouth marketing deals with the process of transferring information from one person to another through oral communication; it became an important issue in the marketing activities of various organizations. Suderland (1998) has defined word-of-mouth statements as a threshold for approval which makes consumer informs his friends, colleagues and relatives about events that brought him a certain level of satisfaction.

The effect of word-of-mouth statements on the consumer behavior, preferences, and choices studied by Katzolarsfeld (1955) more than half a century ago and it has been a subject of many academic studies since then. Other researchers have confirmed the importance of word-of-mouth statements as a key stimulus to corporate sales. Researchers have also assessed the importance of word-of-mouth statements in terms of regional sales assessment (Mysline and Godes, 2009).

5. Brand Admiration

The brand support framework includes three brand-related behaviors that represent brand message; these are the intention to buy the brand, inclination to admire the brand (with a purpose of positive word-of-mouth

marketing), and inclination towards unfavorable statements about brands (with a purpose of negative word-of-mouth marketing) (Reichheld, 2003).

Information about brands shows that those who show their interest in brands on social networks spend 5 times more money than those who do not like the brands. Admirers who like a brand spend 13.4% of their money on a brand and those who do not like the brand spend only 2.8%. In addition, brands presented on social networking are likely to have more influence on users than brands that are not advertised on these networks. Therefore, it can be argued that admirers of a brand compared to other users make more interactions with each other and they can better pass brand messages across the social networks.

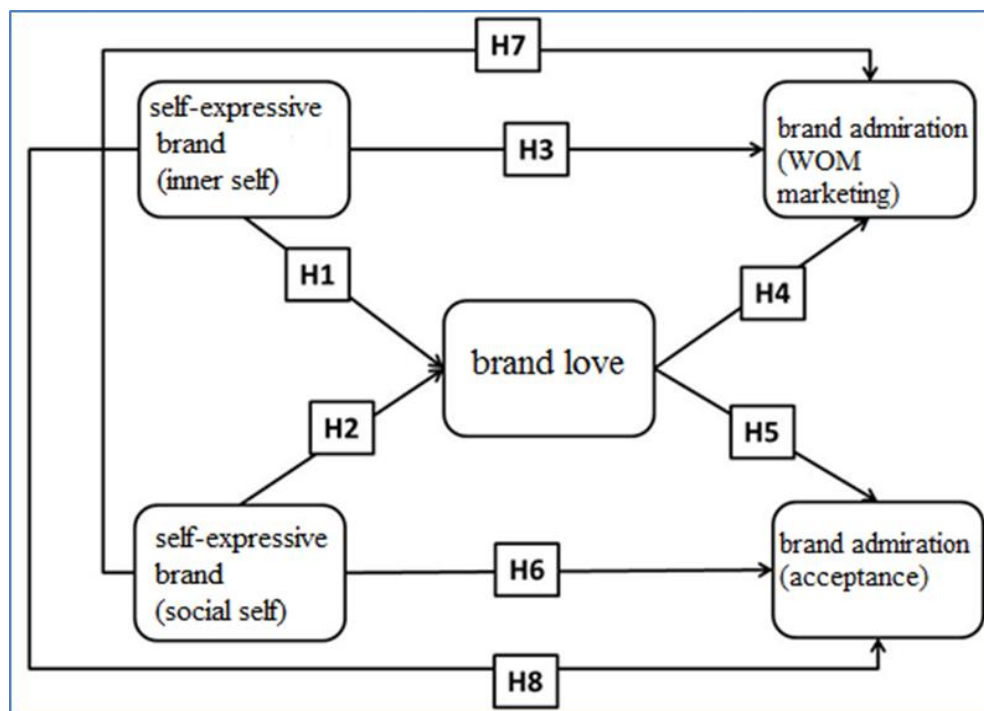


Figure 1: The Conceptual Model of the Research

Methodology

This is applied-developmental research in terms of objectives and it is a descriptive survey in terms of methods. The statistical population was all users of social networks (Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) in Isfahan. Therefore, the statistical population is infinite. The sampling method was availability sampling which is a non-random sampling technique. Therefore, given the infinite population, 384 people who were users of social networks in Isfahan were selected as study samples. A standard questionnaire was used for data collection. The items of the questionnaire about the research variables were adopted from the Wallace and Chernatony research (2014). The content and face validity were used to assess the validity of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability of the data collection tool, i.e. the questionnaire. In the inferential statistics section, structural equation modeling has been used for hypothesis testing.

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of Research Variables

Key variables	Cronbach's alpha	Reliability confirmation/rejection
Self-expressive brand (inner self)	0.852	Confirmed
Self-expressive (social self)	0.816	Confirmed

Brand love	0.901	Confirmed
Brand admiration (WOM marketing)	0.917	Confirmed
Brand admiration (acceptance)	0.817	Confirmed
Whole questionnaire	0.915	Confirmed

Research Hypotheses

1. Self-expressive brand (inner self) has a positive direct effect on brand love.
2. Self-expressive brand (social self) has a positive direct effect on brand love.
3. Self-expressive brand (inner self) has a positive direct effect on WOM marketing.
4. Brand love has a positive direct effect on WOM marketing.
5. Brand love has a positive direct effect on brand admiration.
6. Self-expressive brand (inner self) has a positive direct effect on WOM marketing
7. Self-expressive brand (social self) has a positive direct effect on brand admiration.

Findings

The normality of data and variables is the prerequisite to perform structural equations. Skewness-kurtosis and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were used for testing the normality of the data obtained from variables.

Table 2: Skewness-Kurtosis Test Results

Questions	Skewness	kurtosis	Questions	Skewness	kurtosis
1	0.287	-0.386	13	-0.656	0.911
2	0.102	-0.793	14	-0.699	0.584
3	0.295	-0.466	15	-0.506	0.701
4	-0.285	-0.670	16	-0.055	-0.456
5	0.272	-0.791	17	-0.395	-0.218
6	-0.419	-0.692	18	-0.444	-0.187
7	0.432	-0.427	19	-0.614	0.248
8	0.299	-0.869	20	-0.969	0.244
9	-0.712	0.959	21	-0.284	-0.428
10	-0.874	0.832	22	-0.807	0.909
11	-0.611	0.937	23	-0.666	0.898
12	-0.712	0.959	24	-0.685	0.250

According to Table 2, the Skewness and kurtosis of all questions fall within the standard range of -1 to 1; therefore, the distribution of data for each question in this study was normal and the prerequisite of normal data for each variable to perform structural equations was approved.

Table 3: The Results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test in Examining the Normality of Variables

Variables	Significance level	(Non)normality
Self-expressive brand (inner self)	0.411	Normal
Self-expressive (social self)	0.122	Normal
Brand love	0.094	Normal

Brand admiration (WOM marketing)	0.081	Normal
Brand admiration (acceptance)	0.101	Normal

According to Table 3, the significance level (sig), obtained from software output for all the variables, is greater than 0.05; as a result, H₁ is confirmed and the claim that data distribution is not normal is rejected. Therefore, the distribution of data for each variable in this study was normal and the prerequisite of normal data for each variable to perform parametric structural equations with LISREL was established.

Table 4: Results of Correlation Coefficients between Research Variables

Raw	Latent variables	1	2	3	4	5
1	Self-expressive brand (inner self)	-				
2	Self-expressive (social self)	0.41	-			
3	Brand love	0.33	0.21	-		
4	Brand admiration (WOM marketing)	0.54	0.32	0.45	-	
5	Brand admiration (acceptance)	0.41	0.30	0.73	0.52	-

As shown in Table 4, since all pairwise correlation coefficients between the variables discussed in the present study were below 0.9, no high correlation was found and the degree of correlation was reasonable. Therefore, research data had the necessary value for the research conduction.

Table 5: Results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Observed Variables for the Latent Variables

Latent variable	Observed variable (questions)	Factor load	P-value	Validity confirmation/rejection
Self-expressive brand (inner self)	1	0.57	0.000	Confirmed
	2	0.77	0.000	Confirmed
	3	0.70	0.000	Confirmed
	4	0.69	0.001	Confirmed
Self-expressive brand (social self)	5	0.71	0.000	Confirmed
	6	0.72	0.000	Confirmed
	7	0.70	0.000	Confirmed
	8	0.73	0.000	Confirmed
Brand love	9	0.54	0.000	Confirmed
	10	0.60	0.000	Confirmed
	11	0.65	0.020	Confirmed
	12	0.59	0.000	Confirmed
	13	0.58	0.000	Confirmed
	14	0.63	0.000	Confirmed
	15	0.55	0.000	Confirmed
	16	0.570	0.000	Confirmed
Brand admiration (WOM marketing)	17	0.70	0.000	Confirmed
	18	0.82	0.000	Confirmed

Brand admiration (acceptance)	19	0.78	0.000	Confirmed
	20	0.74	0.000	Confirmed
	21	0.74	0.000	Confirmed
	22	0.53	0.000	Confirmed
	23	0.52	0.011	Confirmed
	24	0.56	0.000	Confirmed

As shown in Table 5, since factor load is greater than 0.5, the C.R value (critical ratio) is valid at 95% confidence level for all of the observable variables relevant to each of the five latent variables of the research. Figure 2 shows the LISREL output for the confirmatory factor analysis of the observable variables.

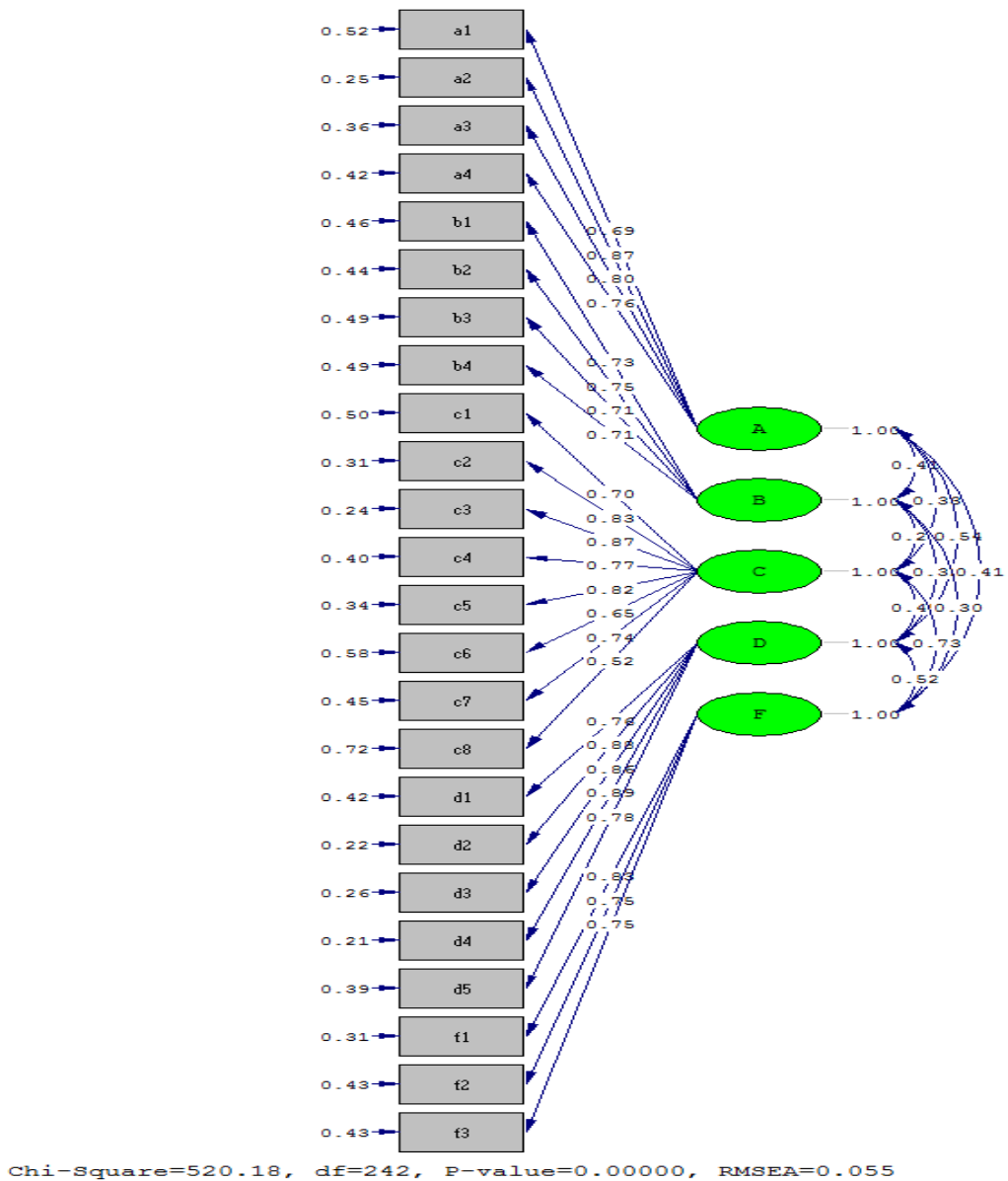


Figure 2: The LISREL Output for the Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Observed Latent Variables

Table 6: Variables Notation in LISREL

Notation	variables
A	Self-expressive brand (inner self)
B	Self-expressive (social self)
C	Brand love
D	Brand admiration (WOM marketing)
F	Brand admiration (acceptance)

Given that the research conceptual model has content validity, face validity, and reliability (each variable and the whole questionnaire are validated separately, and all have a standard range of above 0.7), fit indices of the research structural model are computable. These indices and their calculations are represented in Table (7):

Table 7: Fit Indices of the Research Structural Model

goodness of fit	Standard limit	Computed amount	Result
Chi-square test	Less than the value of DF multiplied by three	Degree of freedom: 243 Chi-square: 533	Acceptable
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.05 or less for good models; models with RMSEA>0.1 have poor fit	0.048	Acceptable and good fit
Incremental fit index (IFI)	Above 0.9	0.98	Acceptable
Comparative fit index(CFI)	Above 0.9	0.98	Acceptable
Normed fit index (NFI)	Above 0.9	0.96	Acceptable
GFI	Above 0.9	0.90	Acceptable
AGFI	Above 0.9	0.97	Acceptable
NNFI	Above 0.9	0.98	Acceptable
RMR	The closer to 0 the better	0.030	Acceptable

As shown in Table 7, in the research structural model, 9 main fit indices were used in three general groups to examine the fit of the research structural model. Therefore, according to Table 7, fit indices are said to be acceptable which indicates the structural model developed in this research, has a good fit with respect to all 9 indices.

After examining the fit indices of the structural model, we tested the hypotheses.

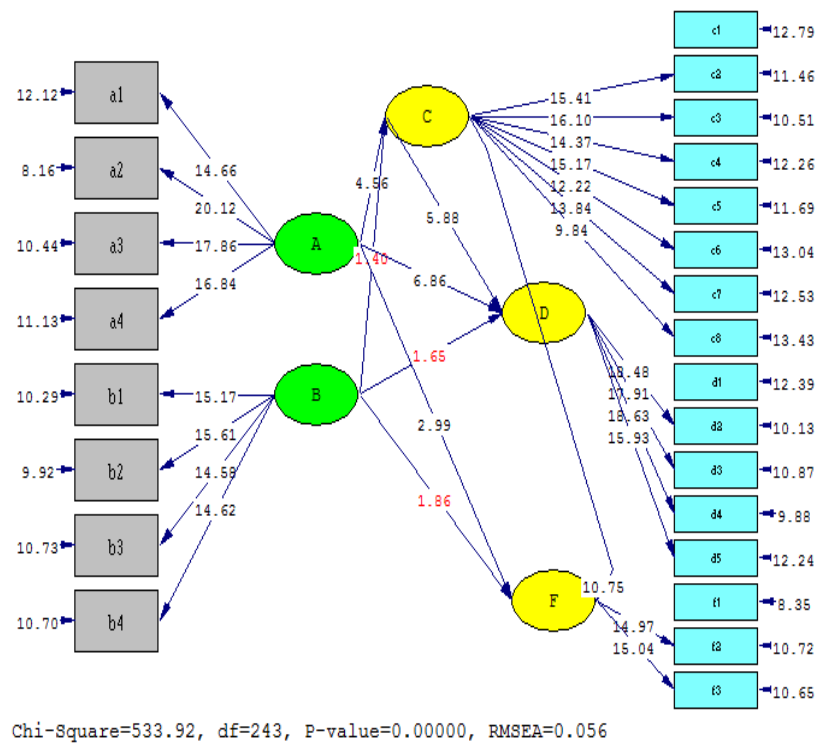


Figure 3: The LISREL Output for T-Test (Conformity Factor Analysis) in Examining the Relationships between the Variables of the Structural Model

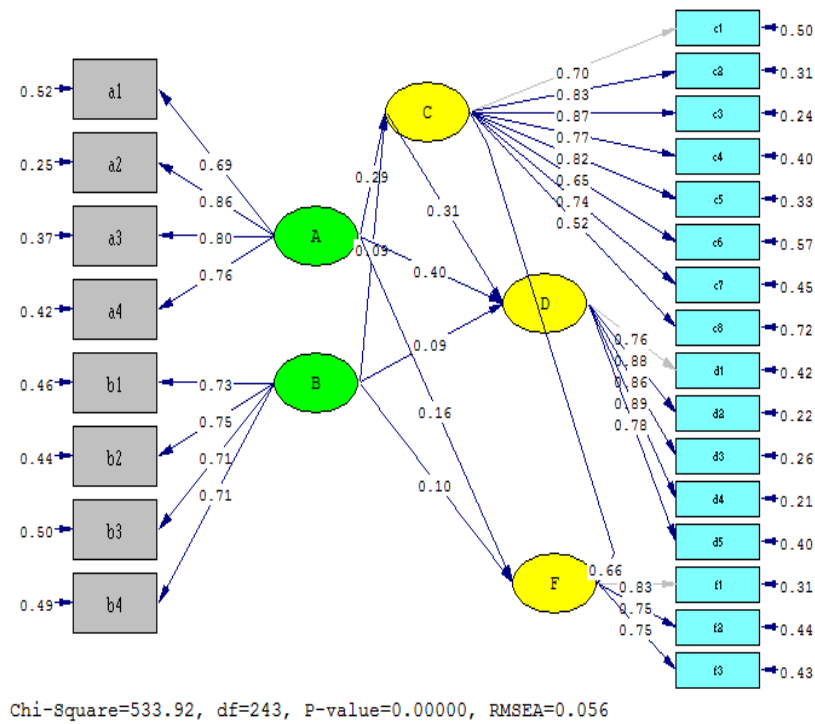


Figure 4: The LISREL Output for the Path Coefficients in the Relationships between the Variables of the Structural Model

Based on two confirmatory factor analysis and path coefficient tests, the test results of all the research hypotheses are represented in Table 8.

Table 8: Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis number	Hypothesis	Value of t statistic	Factor load	Result
1	Self-expressive brand (inner self) has a positive direct effect on brand love	4.56	4.56	Confirmed
2	Self-expressive brand (social self) has a positive direct effect on brand love	1.40	1.40	Rejected
3	Self-expressive brand (inner self) has a positive direct effect on WOM marketing	6.86	6.86	Confirmed
4	Brand love has a positive direct effect on WOM marketing	5.88	5.88	Confirmed
5	Brand love has a positive direct effect on brand admiration	10.75	10.75	Confirmed
6	Self-expressive brand (social self) has a positive direct effect on brand admiration	1.86	1.86	Rejected
7	Self-expressive brand (social self) has a positive direct effect on WOM marketing	1.66	1.66	Rejected
8	Self-expressive brand (inner self) has a positive direct effect on brand admiration (acceptance)	2.99	0.16	Confirmed

Conclusion

Hypothesis 1

Given the results, a self-expressive brand (inner self) had a positive direct effect on brand love and the effect size was 0.29. From the perspective of social network users, brands that they like on social networks, show the type of people they are and represent their personality, and their inner feelings towards themselves; and they assume that brands they like on social networks mirror their internal morality. This assumption makes them believe that brands they like on social networks are wonderful. This result is inconsistent with research results by Wallace and Chernatony (2014), Aghazadeh et al. (2015), Moradi et al. (2014).

Hypothesis 2

Given the results, a self-expressive brand (social self) does not have a positive direct effect on brand love. From perspective of social network users, in some cases, when they like a brand on social networks it helps them build their self-image on the mind of friends and other users, promote their social status, increase the positive feelings they receive from others, and ultimately improve other users' attitudes towards them; however, these did not occur to an extent that makes them believe brands they like on social networks (likes) are wonderful. This result is inconsistent with the results of research by Wallace and Chernatony (2014), Aghazadeh et al. (2015) and Moradi et al. (2014).

Hypothesis 3

Given the results, a self-expressive brand (inner self) had a positive effect on word-of-mouth marketing and the effect size was 0.40%. From the perspective of social network users in Isfahan, brands they like on social networks show the type of people they are, and represent their personality, and their inner feelings towards themselves; and they assume that brands they like on social networks, mirror their internal morality; therefore, this assumption makes them believe that they should talk about brands they like on social network

to other users, and increase their interaction about that brand on social networks. This result is consistent with the research results by Wallace and Chernatony (2014) and Kheiry et al. (2013).

Hypothesis 4

Given the results, brand love had a positive direct effect on word-of-mouth marketing and the effect size was 0.31. From the perspective of social network users, brands they like on social networks are wonderful; these brands make them feel good and they are great, they have special feelings towards brands which make them feel happy, and the users think they love brands they like on social networks and have a feeling of attachment towards them. Therefore, this assumption made them believe they should talk about the brand they like with other users on social networks and they should increase their interactions in social networks about that brand. This result is consistent with research results by Wallace and Chernatony (2014), Saeednia and Bakhtiari (2016), Saeednia and Tolouei (2015), Kioro and Karjaluo, Monoca (2016), and Batra et al. (2012).

Hypothesis 5

Given the results, brand love had a positive direct effect on brand admiration and the effect size was 0.66. From the perspective of social network users, brands they like on social networks are wonderful, these brands make them feel good and they are great, they have special feelings towards brands which make them feel happy, and the users think they love brands they like on social networks and have a feeling of attachment towards them. Therefore, this assumption made them like the products advertised by brands on social networks. This result is consistent with the research results by Wallace and Chernatony (2014), Ruediger Kaufman and Agapi Manarito (2016), Rodriguez and Reis (2013), Yasin and Shamim (2013), and Kankalusufilo et al. (2010).

Hypothesis 6

Given the results, self-expressive brand (social self) did not have a positive direct effect on brand admiration. From perspective of social network users, in some cases, when they like a brand on social networks (likes), it helps them build their self-image on the mind of friends and other users, promote their social status, increase the positive feelings they receive from others, and ultimately improve other users' attitudes towards them; however, these did not occur to an extent that makes them like the products advertised by brands on social networks. This result is inconsistent with research results by Wallace and Chernatony (2014) and Arghashi et al. (2014).

Hypothesis 7

Given the results, a self-expressive brand (social self) did not have a positive direct effect on word-of-mouth marketing. From perspective of users of Telegram, Facebook and other social network in Isfahan, in some cases, when they like a brand on social networks, (likes) it helps them build their self-image on the mind of friends and other users, promote their social status, increase the positive feelings they receive from others, and ultimately improve other users' attitudes towards them; however, these did not occur to an extent that makes them believe they should talk about brands they like on social networks with other users. This result is inconsistent with research results by Wallace and Chernatony (2014) and Kheiry et al. (2013).

Hypothesis 8

Given the results, a self-expressive brand (inner self) had a positive direct effect on brand admiration (acceptance). From perspective of users of Telegram, Facebook and other social networks in Isfahan, brands they like on social networks show the type of people they are, and represent their personality, and their inner feelings towards themselves; and they assume that brands they like on social networks mirror their internal morality; therefore, this assumption makes them like the products advertised by brands on social networks,

and also makes them want to try products introduced by brands on social networks. This result is consistent with the research results by Wallace and Chernatony (2014), Arghashi et al. (2014), Kaufman and Agapi Manarito (2016), Yasin and Shamim (2013), Rodriguez and Reis (2013), and Kankalusufilo et al. (2010).

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